

Learning to use the toilet

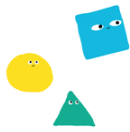
Using the toilet is a natural process that develops gradually at the child's pace, rather than when the parent decides that the child is going to be toilet "trained." Instead of "potty training," or "toilet training" the Montessori method refers to the process as "toilet independence," "toilet awareness" or "toilet learning." That's because using the toilet is a skill that children learn, like crawling and walking and we don't ever say that we are training children to crawl, walk, talk and so on.

Early beginning

Modern education focuses on intellectual development and doesn't consider much toilet independence. Toilet learning doesn't usually come to parents' mind until they have a toddler running around the house. Actually, the process could be initiated much earlier – as early as the child's first diaper change. It begins, of course, not with using a potty but with preparation. Every time an adult is changing a baby's diaper is a great opportunity to build up the vocabulary that will later help the child recognize and name the body functions and express the need to use the toilet. Phrases like, "you're wet," or "your diaper is full" could be used and then explain what follows: "we need to change your diaper." Mind the language (verbal and non-verbal!) Urinating and defecating are normal body functions and there is nothing to be ashamed of. Avoiding negative associations would help the child develop a healthy attitude. When the child is stable while sitting, this is an indication that they can now control the pelvic area of their bodies and they can have voluntary movement there. When the child is secure and walking, it is time to start changing the diaper while they are standing. Any distraction during this process is not helpful. It is much better to involve them in the whole process, explain verbally, let them hold their T-shirt up.

Preparing the environment

Montessori is all about prepared adults and a prepared environment. Once the parents are prepared for the big step, it is time to prepare the environment. It is important for children to have everything in the environment in size corresponding to their own. They live in a big world, in big homes, full of big furniture. When the environment is prepared according to their size and abilities, they feel much more comfortable in it, free to explore it and to get the best out of it.



The environment can be prepared much earlier. This way it would be ready when the time comes for it to respond to the child's needs. Children often start being interested in toilets around the age of 1. They might want to observe and try to imitate their parents using the toilet and it would be appropriate to have the environment prepared for that. A potty next to the big toilet is a good beginning.

When the child shows signs of interest in dressing and undressing themselves, it's good to provide them with clothes that would allow them to be successfully independent. Elastic-waisted trousers can be very useful. Trousers with zippers, buttons or laces are inappropriate because they don't give the child the necessary independence. So are overalls, dresses and tights. Once the child has started actively learning to use the toilet, the diaper becomes the odd man out. Now is the time to make the transition to training pants – they absorb some of the moisture and at the same time they give the child the feelings of being wet or dry. At some point the child realizes that being dry is much more comfortable and begins to hold for a longer time.

When the environment is prepared and the child starts showing more interest in sitting on the potty, the adult can teach them to pull down and up their trousers and introduce sequentially all the steps: pulling the pants down, sitting on the potty/toilet, using toilet paper, pulling the pants up, flushing the toilet, washing their hands, wiping their hands dry.

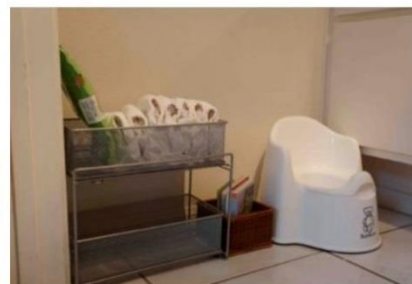
Items for the toilet environment

- A potty chair, positioned in the bathroom only, not moving around the house, so the child will know where to find it when needed. A potty chair is good because the child can hold with hands and their feet are on the floor, knees higher than the pelvis. A toilet seat is also an option but it needs a step so the child can independently climb up, sit down and have their feet on the step. And the step must be all the time prepared in front of the toilet so the child can use it any time without the need to ask an adult for help.
- A wipeable hamper or a bucket for wet clothes
- A small chair the child can sit on to change wet clothes
- A basket of dry underwear/training pants
- A rug (preferably wipeable) to place under all of the above in order to define the child's toilet space and to provide a slip-free area.



- A small sink or source of water where the child can wash their hands (consider a faucet extender)

Here are some examples on how to organize the toddler's toilet environment at home, depending on the space and resources available:



Role of the adult

The adult should provide support for the child in the process of learning to use the toilet. This could be achieved through the following:

- Making the toilet space comfortable by *preparing the environment* properly
- Incorporating toileting into the *daily routine* – offer using the toilet at times that the child normally needs it, for example: upon waking up, before going outside, after coming in from outside, after lunch/before nap etc.
- Using proper *words* – rather than asking “Do you want to go to the toilet?” (which will have a natural and sincere “No” as an answer) or expressing opinions “I think you should go to the toilet” simply saying “It’s time to use the toilet” would work better. Later, when the child becomes more aware of their body, they will be able to say “No, I don’t need to go now” and the adult can respond by “That’s fine, I know that you will tell me if you need my help when you need to go.”
- *Never forcing* a child to use the toilet/potty. This is very important because it might result in a negative association and prevent the child from getting used to the potty, in which case the whole process must be postponed with a few weeks.
- *Never scolding or overreacting* – going to the toilet is one of the most natural things in the world, it is not a cause for celebration. Expressing content to



reinforce the achievement is fine. Clapping and screaming excitedly is not. Scolding will not help, it might only impose guilt and this way create a negative association.

- *Never interrupting* a child's activity to use the toilet – his might create a negative association (the potty is taking them away from something they enjoy doing). Furthermore, parents (as well as teachers) are working for the whole development of the child and not only the toilet learning. Allowing a toddler to concentrate on an activity undisturbed for a longer time would be beneficial for the child's development.
- *Using correct terminology* – boys have a penis, girls have a vulva. That's how it is and it is just another part of their body, like their arms and legs. These parts of their bodies also deserve to be given correct names.
- *Being patient* and providing the child with enough time and space to adjust.

If they don't make it in time

If the child is too engaged in an activity and misses the moment to go to the toilet, they will just need to change. It is not the end of the world and it is actually teaching them about consequences. It is also an additional exercise in changing clothes. The adult should simply say in a calm voice "You are wet. Let's put on some dry clothes." The child can take off the wet clothes in the bathroom and put them in the prepared hamper or bucket, take the dry underwear from the supply in the bathroom as well and change at their own pace. By teaching them to do that, instead of handing them everything necessary and not making them work for achieving their comfort, adults teach children to be independent and self-sufficient, helping them to help themselves. The adult can help if asked for it. Again, interrupting the activity might create a negative association so it is better to wait until the child finishes playing before suggesting changing the wet clothes. Another possibility is to wait for a moment of distraction, when the child's concentration is already broken and then prompt the child to change their clothes.

Obstacles

The biggest possible obstacle is the attitude of the adults. Toilet awareness is a big topic and there are some myths building up around it. Some parents think that early toilet learning can psychologically damage their children. It is important to not give in to misleading ideas and always observe children and support them in



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their needs. Stress, illness and fatigue will also have an effect on their toilet pattern.

Learning to use the toilet might happen within a couple of weeks or it may take as long as several months. It depends on the child and the adult must simply go with the child's pace, be patient and supportive, provide the child with everything needed (in physical and psychological aspect) and just be there.